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SUBJECT: SECOND KREMLIN PARTY, "FOR A JUST RUSSIA," DEBUTS
IN MARCH 11 ELECTION

REF: A. MOSCOW 307

- [1](#)B. MOSCOW 261
- [1](#)C. MOSCOW 656
- [1](#)D. MOSCOW 868
- [1](#)E. 06 MOSCOW 13071
- [1](#)F. YEKATERINBURG 10
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- [1](#)I. ST. PETERSBURG 31

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Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) The campaign for elections, which will take place in fourteen regions March 11, has been marked by much the same behavior that has marred previous contests; refusal to register parties in some contests, the liberal use of "administrative resources" to support Kremlin favorites and discourage others, and uneven access to the media. Changes to the law on extremism have made opposition parties reluctant to go on the attack, and the media careful in reporting it when they did. The second, Kremlin-licensed party, For A Just Russia (SR), will debut in fourteen regional elections on March 11. They are widely viewed here as a dress rehearsal for the December State Duma contest and the presidential succession to follow. SR has had ample resources, media play, and a greenlight from President Putin, but resistance in the regions has complicated its emergence. It remains to be seen if SR has succeeded, in the mere four months since its creation, in establishing itself as a party of the left, which would allow it to siphon votes from its rivals, and set the stage for the managed, two-party system seemingly envisaged by the Kremlin. End summary.

Fourteen Elections

[1](#)2. (U) On March 11, elections will be held in fourteen regions of Russia: the republics of Komi and Dagestan; the regions of Leningrad, Moscow, Murmansk, Omsk, Orel, Pskov, Samara, Stavropol, Tomsk, Tyumen, and Vologda; and the city of St. Petersburg. In every election except Moscow region, St. Petersburg, and Dagestan, voters will cast two ballots; one for their favorite political party, a second for their preferred "single-mandate" candidate. The March 11 contests are widely seen here as a dress rehearsal for the December State Duma elections and the presidential succession to

follow.

New Rules

13. (SBU) This set of elections is the first to be held since the election law was significantly amended in 2006. Among the key new provisions:

-- the "against all" block on the ballots has been removed, depriving voters of the direct opportunity to express their unhappiness with the candidates and political parties to choose from;

-- minimum voter turnout laws were abolished, meaning that elections will be valid, even if few voters go to the polls in any regional election. (Because elections were scheduled in Dagestan, Komi, the Moscow and Vologda regions before the amendments were adopted, the minimum voter turnout requirement remains valid there.);

-- parties not represented in the State Duma must submit a monetary deposit or collect thousands of valid signatures in order to qualify for the ballot in each region;

-- an amendment to the law on extremism has made it difficult for candidates to engage in criticism of opponents.

Who's Playing?

14. (SBU) Eighteen parties attempted to qualify for the March 11 races, but the number of parties registered in any given regional contest ranges from five to eight. Only four parties --United Russia (YR), For A Just Russia (SR), the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), were registered in all fourteen races. Patriots of Russia (PR) is registered in

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ten of the twelve contests it attempted to qualify for and the Union of Right Forces (SPS) is competing in nine of the thirteen contests for which it attempted to register. (Embassy understands that a PR court case is still pending in Stavropol as of March 9.) Yabloko suffered most in the registration process. It attempted to register in ten regions, but is on the ballot in four. More importantly, Yabloko was excluded from the race --in St. Petersburg-- where polls and past performance suggested it would fare best.

Kremlin Party Has The Advantages

15. (SBU) It is a foregone conclusion that the Kremlin-cozy United Russia party will finish first in all fourteen races, but the waning appeal of politicians too long in power, voter apathy, and the appearance of a second, Kremlin-anointed venture --For A Just Russia-- have led observers and the party itself to expect that YR will garner fewer votes than in the October 2006 regional elections. (In the nine contests held in October, YR on average won 46 percent of the vote. According to the March 9 Vedomosti, YR is expecting an average 44.9 percent on March 11.)

16. (SBU) Giving YR a "leg up" on March 11 is an official campaign war chest of USD 21 million, access to so-called "administrative resources," and the use of "locomotives" (popular national or regional politicians) at the top of YR's party lists. (YR is not alone in its use of "locomotives." SPS's Nikita Belykh tops his party's list in each of the nine regions where it is competing. The LDPR's populist Chairman Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is leading for his party in some of the fourteen races at stake.) SR trails YR in the campaign-finance category, with USD 15.2 million, while Yabloko has a mere USD 1.3 million at its disposal, and the KPRF, USD 877 thousand.

17. (SBU) Interlocutors in the regions have tended to focus their complaints more on YR's access to "administrative resources" than its advantage in campaign money. Administrative resources range from campaign advantages that in the West would be seen as the prerogatives of incumbency to recourse to other, less savory election tools. Each of the fourteen regions has seen numerous visits by high-ranking GOR and YR officials during the course of the campaign and the line between GOR and YR accomplishments has often been blurred in order to improve the party's image with voters. YR's campaign staff has been seriously augmented with the addition of regional officials who have been pressed into part-time or full-time service.

18. (SBU) Much of the regional media has in effect stumped for the Kremlin's favorite party. Although regional contacts from other parties tell us they have generally been given the minimal print and broadcast media access mandated by law, their modest exposure is dwarfed by the media attention allotted YR-connected visitors from Moscow and the additional, paid political advertising that YR and SR campaign chests can finance. In one case where a party --Yabloko in St. Petersburg-- posed a limited threat it was removed from the ballot. Interlocutors in the regions also allege that YR-loyal factory, farm, and office directors will urge their employees to vote United Russia and, especially in the rural regions or factory towns, work overtime to ensure that their urgings are heeded.

The Also Rans: SR

19. (SBU) While YR seems to have all of the advantages, and appears to have left little to chance in its efforts to prove that it can deliver the vote and continue to enjoy the Kremlin's favor in the future, question marks remain. The greatest unknown is the prospects for the "second" Kremlin party, SR. SR is new to the national scene (it was formed at the end of October 2006) and the product of a messy merger of three political parties and their sometimes mutually antagonistic local leaders. While the party has been given a greenlight by President Putin, resistance at the local level from politicians unaccustomed to fostering controlled competition and unable to decipher signals from the Kremlin, have complicated SR's debut. Most expect the party to cross the necessary threshold in all fourteen districts, but refuse to speculate further. Representation in each of the regions at this point should be sufficient for SR, which has its eye

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on the December State Duma elections.

10. (SBU) In clearing a place for itself, SR has co-opted territory previously owned by the KPRF, PR and, to a lesser extent, LDPR. Observers have forecast from the beginning that SR's task would be in part to marginalize the Left. The March 11 results should show to what extent it has succeeded, and they should indicate as well to what degree SR has positioned itself as an alternative to YR. Many here believe that the creation of SR was a step on the way to establishing a managed, two-party democracy, and they predicted an artificial competition between two "opposition" parties in fact joined at the hip. SR indeed enjoys many of the advantages of YR:

-- It has ample campaign funds. (It was able to pay the often hefty registration deposit in all fourteen regions, in that way avoiding the problems encountered by parties whose meager financial resources forced them to gather signatures in order to qualify for the ballot.)

-- It has easier access to the national media than its competitors in the opposition, in part because a number of SR's leading lights like SR Chairman Sergey Mironov occupy high office. (Mironov is Chairman of the Federation Council.)

-- It has President Putin's blessing.

¶11. (SBU) On the other side of the ledger, however, Russia's governors and other prominent politicians have largely backed YR, leaving some mayors and other, lesser local politicians to stump for SR. The Kremlin, while giving the nod to SR, appears to have provided it with little of the active assistance available to YR. Finally, although SR is the result of the merger of three, already existing parties, it is under pressure to show results in elections occurring a mere four months after its creation; a difficult task, even for an "establishment" opposition party in a very managed environment.

The Other Also Rans

¶12. (SBU) The other parties competing with SR for second place are the KPRF and LDPR. In the March 2006 regional elections in eight regions, before the advent of SR, the KPRF finished second six times, which LDPR and Rodina each snagged one second-place slot. Although short of funds, riven with disagreements, ideologically adrift, and charisma challenged, KPRF remains the only genuine national party in Russia, with grassroots and a pedigree. Its voters --pensioners-- go to the polls. How it will fare will hinge on SR's success with the left.

¶13. (SBU) SPS was buoyed by its December 2006 second-place finish in the December 2006 Perm elections, where it won over sixteen percent of the vote. As has been noted, however, its success was likely traceable to Party Chairman Belykh's lifelong ties to the region and does not predict what may happen on March 11. Handicapping the efforts of the more Western-leaning parties (SPS and Yabloko), in addition to the resources ranged against them, has been their own inability to cooperate in order to maximize their results.

¶14. (SBU) LDPR remains a one-man show, and Zhirinovskiy has stumped for his party in all fourteen elections. He remains the voice of the Russian redneck, and his ability to get a significant minority to go the polls is not in doubt. Possibly playing to LDPR's advantage is the number of elections this time around in Siberia and Russia's North, fertile ground for the disaffected.

The Voter

¶15. (SBU) In a March 9 press conference, Central Election Commission Chairman Aleksandr Veshnyakov predicted that voter turnout on March 11 would equal that of the previous elections, about 36 percent. With the elimination of the minimal voter turnout requirement, the prospect of invalid elections has been averted, whatever the number of ballots cast on election day. Interlocutors in the regions largely expect March 11 to be a "pensioners election," and each party has tailored its platform and campaign rhetoric accordingly. A certain number of ballots will be cast by self-interested

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civil servants. The young, as usual, are expected to largely stay home. Polls suggest that the continued popularity of President Putin and general satisfaction with the current state-of-affairs should translate into widespread voter apathy and an endorsement, by those who vote, of the status quo. The deployment of administrative resources will reinforce that tendency.

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